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AUTHOR Grootings, Peter, Ed.
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ABSTRACT

A meeting held in Berlin provided a forum for researchers from the Central European countries of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland to discuss the research situation in vocational education and training (VET) in their countries and to discuss the possibilities for developing forms of cooperation with researchers from the 10 Western European countries that participated. Highlights of the discussion included the following: (1) vocational education and training are developing very quickly in Central Europe, but the contribution of research to these developments appears to be rather marginal; (2) there is a lack of information on recent development in VET systems in Western European countries; (3) in all three Central European countries there is great need for researchers to collaborate with their Western colleagues, especially in terms of conceptual and methodological questions; (4) the potential return from VET research is being highly underestimated in the Central European countries; (5) only in the field of curriculum development is there any impetus for research in the Central European countries; (6) foreign experts who go to the countries should develop a better understanding of the local situations in which they are offering their skills; (7) existing research infrastructures in the three countries are very uneven; and (8) new avenues of cooperation between the Central and Western European nations need to be explored and implemented. (KC)

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Editor: Peter Grootings
Tel.: (030) 884 12 184

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TOWARDS COOPERATION AMONG RESEARCHERS OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET) IN EUROPE

Platform meeting of VET researchers from EC, EFTA and Central Europe
Cedefop
Berlin, 23rd October 1992

1. Background and aims of the meeting

On 23rd October 1992, one day after Cedefop's annual FORUM of Vocational Education and Training Research Institutes (see FLASH 5/92), a discussion was organized between researchers from EC and EFTA countries participating in the FORUM meeting and researchers from Poland, Hungary and the Czech and Slowak Republic. The aim of the meeting was to provide a platform for the researchers from Central Europe for presenting the research situation in their countries and to dicuss the possibillities for developing forms of cooperation with researchers from the other countries.

Besides researchers from the 3 Central European countries, researchers from 8 EC countries and 2 EFTA countries took part in the meeting. Mrs. Anne-Francoise Theunissen, President of Cedefop's Management Board attended the meeting as well and the Commission was represented by Mrs. Inge Weilnböck-Buck, member of a recently created working group inside the Task Force Training and Human Resources with the aim to prepare the establishment of the European Training Foundation.

The meeting was chaired by Mr. Ernst Piehl, Director of Cedefop. Discussions centered around presentations made by the guests from Hungary, Poland and the Czech and Slowak Republic (see attached list of presented papers). These three countries are about to sign Association Agreements with the European Community which will bring them in a situation where the reform and modernization of their vocational education and training systems has to be

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put in a european perspective. Hence the - mutual - interest for cooperation, also among researchers. In the absence of the European Training Foundation, about the location of which EC leaders are expected to finally take a decision at the Edinbrough summit, Cedefop has provided its modest resources in order to promote the development of such cooperation among researchers as a complementary effort to various actions sponsored by the European Commission in Brussels.

2. Developments in vocational education and training in Central Europe

Developments in the mentioned countries in the area of vocational education and training are very fast but the contribution of research to these developments appears to be rather marginal. The need for fundamental reform and modernization of VET systems has become recognized in all countries while clear concepts as to how to develop and implement changes are still missing. Also there seems to exist a lack of information and understanding of recent developments in VET systems in West European countries. On these issues one would expect researchers to to be able to make their contribution: comparative research is one of the most cost-effective ways of policy development. In practice, however, in Poland, the VET research infrastructure has almost completely disappeared; in Hungary, the rich infrastructure that exists is hardly being used and only in the Czech and Slowak Republics there are indications that existing VET research institutions will play a role in the reform of the system. In all countries there is a tremendous need among the researchers to collaborate with their western colleagues, especially in terms of conceptual and methodological questions.

Let us remember that in each of these countries traditionally 70-80% of primary schoolleavers were streamlined into one form of vocational education, the majority as a matter of fact into rather narrow types preparing for industrial worker occupations in big state enterprises. Before, a large part of vocational education and training was organized in, and by state enterprises. The relationships between education and employment were regulated administratively, through a manpower planning system that included schools and enterprises. Enterprises were sure to be able to fill their - highly artificial - labour shortages, and schoolleavers were sure to find a job, though not necessarily the one that they aspired or had been trained for. Costs of vocational education and training were fully covered from the state budget mediated by bargaining between ministries and

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enterprises. Administration of the VET system was jointly organized by several sectoral ministries (who were also responsible for curriculum development) under the coordination of the Ministry of Education.

Now, administrative regulation has collapsed with enterprises being privatized, or at least being forced to operate under market conditions. As a result, they have almost completely withdrawn from their educational roles while at the same time government budgets have come under severe crisis, leading to cuts in public spending among others of course on education and training. While it was relatively easy to give up from one day to the other the priciple of administrative regulation, it proved far more difficult to set up (a) a proper administration structure at ministerial level and (b) the infrastructure that a labour market needs in order to match offer and demand. In addition, restructuring of industry is gradually leading to high numbers of unemployed, for whom neither the institutions - such as labour offices, or training organizations - nor the policy measures - such as re- or further training - have been developed as yet. Finally, occupational structures characteristic for employment systems based on heavy industry and industrial low-quality mass production prove not to offer the economic prospects for national economies to survive. Vocational education infrastructures for previously neglected employment areas (small- and medium sized private enterprises in services, commerce and industry) are yet to be developed.

Such are the challenges faced by those involved in reform and modernization of vocational education and training systems in the countries of Central Europe. The papers written by Istvan Bessenyi (Hungary), Ewa Czarnocka (Poland), Jan Kristen (Slowak Republic) and Bohumil Janys (Czech Republic) provide in more detail the dramatic situation in their countries which in each case forms the background for an analysis of the role of research.

3. The role of research in the reform of VET systems in Central Europe

Although there is a tremendous desire to "learn" from western experiences, sometimes leading to unrealistic "copying" of existing models on the part of educational authorities, there is a general impression that the potential contribution to VET reform of national researchers is being highly underestimated. Even where research infrastructures are still available there appears to be a strong tendency to work with "foreign

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experts". This is very often the result of the existing practice of "conditional sponsoring", through which foreign assistance programmes provide technical assistance by their own chosen experts.

There is of course a continuous tension between foreign experts "who do not understand anything about the local situation" and the local experts or researchers "who still lack the information and understanding about foreign experiences" and above all "who lack the practical experience in implementation of changes". There seems to be a general impression among the researchers though that their role and possible contribution could be much higher. Two main problems were mentioned during the discussions: (a) Generally there is little appreciation among politicians concerning the contribution of policy related research. Most issues, including education and training are very politicized and political or personal conviction is still more important than systematized evidence produced by research. Also, the general attitude among politicians is that there is a lack of money and not a lack of knowledge. This is a problem of acceptance and legitimation of national research communities. (b) At the same time it is true that those responsible for the implementation of changes realize more and more how little is known about experiences from other countries, that such experiences cannot simply be transfered to their own situation and that certain research questions and methodologies are unknown, simply because there was no need for them.

Against this background one can understand that in none of the countries there are clear priorities for research on vocational education and training, except perhaps in the field of curriculum development which constituted the main area of research anyway. One can also understand the desire among researchers to cooperate with colleagues from other countries, or at least to become a partner in the ongoing research discussions, also as a way to improve their own status nationally. There was general agreement among the participants in the discussion that even in the short run it will be important for the respective countries to develop their own "local experts", that is to say researchers who are, as professionals, informed about what is going on elsewhere and who are able to translate and adapt such experiences to local conditions. Equally important though seems to be that the "foreign experts" develop a better understanding of the local situation in which they are offering their technical and consultant assistance. It became recognized that there is a mutual interest to get-to-know each other and not only, as western researchers too quickly tend to

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think, in order to speed-up the reforms of the VET systems in the Central and East European countries, but also, as has been rightly argued by Istvan Besseneyi from Hungary, because it should not be excluded that the direction of reforms and changes will not follow the existing patterns at all. The opportunity to radically reform and modernize VET systems may lead to creative solutions that may become interesting for western countries to reflect upon.

4. Research on VET in Hungary, Poland and the Czech and Slowak Republic.

The existing research infrastructures in the mentioned countries are very uneven. In Poland, as the introduction by Ewa Czarnocka revealed, responsibility for VET still lies with the Ministry of National Education which has closed down practically all its research and development institutes. Also VET institutes previously connected to other ministries have been closed down. No new institutes have been established as yet and for the moment the only research on aspects of vocational education are of a pedagogical nature and based in a few universities in the country. Apparently, research does not play any role in present policymaking. The development of a Documentation and Information Centre with access to international information on VET and VET research is considered as a priority for the rebuilding of a national researchinfrastructure.

In Hungary, on the contrary, a whole spectrum of research institutes dealing with different aspects of vocational education and training (basic research, curriculum development, international comparisons, relations with labour market) is still in place, even partly financed by relevant ministries. Ministerial responsibility for VET now lies with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. However, according to Istvan Bessenyi, there is no national priority programme for research and priorities are in practice defined by researchers and research institutes themselves. On the other hand, some of the research institutes are closely involved in the implementation of large modernization programmes sponsored by the World Bank and the EC Phare programme.

In the Czech Republic, as Bohumil Janys Director of the Pedagogical Research Institute, explained, responsibility for VET has recently been passed on to the Ministry of Economic Affairs. His institute has concluded a research contract with the same Ministry . Before, it had elaborated a proposal for the reform of the VET system

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which has become accepted by Parliament. Priority for the institute is to bring Czech VET up to European standards. The institute also participates in the implementation of the PHARE VET Programme.

In the Slowak Republic, it is mainly the Institute for Educational Research where Jan Kristin heads the Department for VET policies, where research is being undertaken. Researchers from this department are also involved in the EC Phare programme. Jan Kristin argued that cooperation with western researchers should concentrate on methodological questions: "We know more or less what we need but we do not know how to get there." To become acquainted with research methodologies and current methodological discussions forms a higher priority than to become informed about research results.

5. The future of cooperation between VET researchers in Europe

With the factual opening-up of Europe the importance of understanding developments in other countries increases accordingly. The experience from Western Europe is that it is very difficult to understand an other country's VET system. As a consequence some of the research institutes have decided to exchange staff for longer periods of time. This, it is argued, is the only way to go if one wants to achieve real mutual understanding. In practice, such attempts have been limited to only few countries. More in general of course, one should also open-up the professional networks and discussions and promote colleagues from Central and Eastern Europe to participate. This is what is in fact happening through various initiatives.

What are the realistic prospects of this to develop further? A first condition would be that it becomes recognized that research (both national and comparative) is important for policy making and that funds become available to finance such research, also in the field of vocational education and training. Recognition should not only come from the government but from the social partners and the academic community at large. Obviously, this is not only a problem for our colleagues in Central and Eastern Europe but existing programmes for assistance could put more emphasis on this than has been the case so far.

Secondly, the international infrastructure has to be there and be made accessible at the same time. This is partly a problem of funds and partly - but very much related - a problem of competences. The problem of

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funding of international cooperation remains a joint responsibility of those who are involved. The problem of competence and responsibility has to be solved at the bilateral and international level. There are already many forms of bi-lateral cooperation between researchers from the different parts of Europe. Researchers also meet internationally in various other contexts. As a matter of fact, the Platform meeting itself has led to new contacts among the participating researchers. At the international level one question of course is about the possible role that CEDEFOP, as a Community institution with a clearly defined mission towards the 12 member states, could play in the near future. This is a question which may soon be answered when the European Training Foundation comes alive. The specific issues pertaining to the implementation of the Association Agreements between the three countries and the European Community are still open for discussion.

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CEDEFOP EAST-WEST PLATFORM FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
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23 October 1992

AVAILABLE DOCUMENTS

1. **Istvan Besseneyi**: Analyse der Entwicklung des Fachschulwesens der ungarischen Republik und Richtungen der wichtichsten Forschungsprioritäten *)

   Language: DE (orig.), EN, FR

   Annex: The renewal of the Hungarian youth vocational training through a World Bank's project.

   Language: EN (orig.)

2. **Ewa Czarnocka**: Stand der Forschungen im Bereich des Berufschulwesens und Forschungsprioritäten in Polen. *)

   Language: DE (orig.)

3. **Jan Kristin**: Tradition and Transitions: Slowak vocational education and training on the crossroad. *)

   Language: EN (orig.), DE, FR

4. **Bohumil Janys**: Analyse der Entwicklung des Fachschulwesens der tschechischen Republik und Richtungen der wichtigsten Forschungsprioritäten. *)

   Language: DE (orig.), EN, FR

5. **CEDEFOP DOCUMENT**: Towards cooperation among researchers of vocational education and training in Europe. Papers presented at the platform meeting of European Vocational Training Research Institutes (27 September 1991).

   Language: EN

*) NOTE: Copies of the above documents are available on request: P. Grootings, CEDEFOP, Tel.: 884 12 184

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